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UNCLAS DUSHANBE 001737

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

STATE FOR EUR/CACEN, SA, DRL
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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [SOCI](#) [KIRF](#) [TI](#)

SUBJECT: DUSHANBE SYNAGOGUE RELOCATION STILL UNRESOLVED, BUT COMING TO A HEAD

¶1. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Please handle accordingly.
Not for public Internet.

¶2. (U) The Ambassador called on Rabbi Mikhail Abdurahmonov on October 26. Koen Davydov, the newly-elected Tajik chairman of the community who has business interests in Israel, also sat in.

On October 21, a young member of the congregation warned the Ambassador the Rabbi was about to leave Dushanbe unless he got a new synagogue and community center building immediately.

¶3. (U) The vast majority of Dushanbe's Bokharan Jews emigrated in the early 1990s, mostly to Israel and New York, leaving a remnant community in Dushanbe of about 200, mostly elderly. The Dushanbe synagogue and community center, which follows the Orthodox tradition, and which serves hot meals to the indigent elderly, is in the center of the city within the territory that has, since the 1980s Soviet urban renewal plan, been slated for clearance for a vast "national park" (urban green space) to surround the Palace of Nations, which is now the nearly completed Presidential Palace. During the past year, the circa 1940s shabby single-story dwellings in the area, like the synagogue, have been mostly cleared away. Among the razed buildings was a neighborhood mosque.

¶4. (U) We are absolutely certain that issues of anti-Semitism are not part of this saga. In fact, the notoriously difficult Dushanbe city government has tried to be helpful, within the limits of secular law.

¶5. (U) NOTE: Some Jewish news services describe the Dushanbe synagogue as a 103-year-old World Heritage Site. It is no such thing. Dushanbe, an 80-year-old New Soviet City, did not exist in 1902 except for a small number of mud-brick houses in a market village on the bluff above the river. The synagogue was originally built in the Soviet-Central-Asian residential style as a private compound in the 1940s when the population surged as a number of Russian research institutes moved to Dushanbe to escape the destruction of World War II. One city archive document lists the synagogue's construction date as 1941. END NOTE.

¶6. (SBU) Abdurahmonov's title, "rabbi," is a courtesy because he is not fully qualified to be a rabbi by academic or theological standards. Since his first meeting with the Ambassador in November 2003, Abdurahmonov has insisted he wants to keep his current building and the city can just make a park around it. Or, if push came to shove, he would be willing to accept from the government another downtown villa of equal size. He has consistently argued that the synagogue cannot locate to a distant site because community members live in the vicinity of the current building. Being elderly, they cannot travel far, and being Orthodox, they cannot use public transportation on the Sabbath.

¶7. (SBU) Boris Kandov, President of the Bokharan Jewish Community of the United States and Canada, was in Dushanbe in November 2004 as part of the Bokharan delegation of former Dushanbe citizens now in the United States who were invited as honored guests to participate in the 80th anniversary festivities of the founding of Dushanbe. The Ambassador asked Kandov and his colleagues to work with Rabbi Abdurahmonov to assist in finding a solution. Kandov and another wealthy emigre, Yagdarov, offered the community one of Yagdarov's residential properties in downtown Dushanbe. But it turned out there was a complication - it was occupied by relatives of General Saidamir Zuhurov, former Minister of Security and

current Chairman of the Tajik Border Guard. And they had no desire to move. Kandov reportedly worked closely with Mayor Obaidulloev, who was quite willing to allocate a new plot of land for the community.

¶8. (SBU) Abdurahmonov told the Ambassador he had told the city, after Kandov returned to New York, to stop the transfer of the land to the community because the synagogue wouldn't own the land, and therefore would be in danger of losing any new building on it. The Ambassador pointed out that no one owns land in Tajikistan, but they do gain long-term rights to it and

do own buildings they construct on it. Abdurahmonov then adjusted his story and said he didn't want new land because he didn't have any money for a new building.

¶ 9. (SBU) As a temporary measure, until the community receives money for a new building, the city offered three rooms in an old building in town that currently houses other associations. Abdurahmonov sniffed that would be inappropriate.

¶ 10. (U) When the Ambassador asked Davydov why businessmen in Israel haven't helped the Dushanbe community financially, Davydov blandly answered, "Because no one asked."

¶ 11. (SBU) Abdurahmonov has told us before that he is bitter he was not able to take advantage of emigration to the United States when it was available to him because he was the family member forced to stay behind to care for an elderly relative. Recently, he has been quoted in the international Jewish press as stridently vowing to leave for Israel unless the City of Dushanbe gives him a new synagogue.

¶ 12. (U) Earlier this year, Abdurahmonov received a notice from the city to vacate the site by the end of July. The area around the synagogue is now mostly rubble, with only a few other residences and shops still standing. A new boulevard is already encroaching on the veranda of one of the synagogue compound's buildings. Soon the city will lose patience, which most cities would have done long ago, and bring the issue to a head.

¶ 13. (SBU) The real issue here is the elderly folks in the community. They are being held captive to brittle egos and what seems to be, as opaque as it is to us, internecine posturing, bickering, and buck-passing.

¶ 14. (SBU) The U.S. and other Western Embassies continue to monitor the synagogue and remnant-community situation closely. Oddly, the former Israeli Ambassador in Tashkent told us he had no interest in this affair. The elderly Tashkent-based, self-styled Orthodox "Rabbi of Central Asia," David Gurevich, occasionally comes to Dushanbe on this issue, but invariably muddies the waters and leaves hard feelings among government officials.

¶ 15. (SBU) COMMENT: We advocated to Kandov in 2004, and to the Bokharan community in New York in early 2003, as well as to NCSJ's Mark Levin, that the best solution would be for a young Jewish seminarian to come to Dushanbe for a year or so to give leadership to the remnant community and to sort out the location problem. We would think it would not be too difficult to raise money in the international Jewish community to build a modest but appropriate new community center and prayer hall in Dushanbe. What is required is a bit a leadership, which Abdurahmonov does not, and apparently will not, provide. END COMMENT.

HOAGLAND

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